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ABSTRACT

In second language instruction, it is important to examine the learner's effort in carrying out classroom activities in order to relate teaching activities to learning theories. Any impact of a teaching activity on the learner's language development must result from what the learner does, not what the teacher does or intends for learner to do. The different forms of effort made by the learner can be classified and used to link theory to practice. Several distinctions can be made: most broadly, between imitation (repeating what the teacher does in an exemplary role) and cerebration (making sense of a problem, finding solutions, and testing them); within imitation, between reproduction (imitation of the language form itself) and simulation (reproduction of language behavior with attention to its context); and within cerebration, construction (cerebration focused on language itself) and deployment (cerebration focused on a knowledge of the world handled through language). Classroom activities involving reproduction and simulation are form-focused and role-focused, respectively. Construction and deployment use activities that are rule-focused and meaning-focused, respectively. Reproduction and construction focus on language as an autonomous phenomenon. Simulation and deployment focus on things outside language as a formal entity. This categorization can inform construction of classroom activities. (MSE)

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THE LEARNER'S EFFORT IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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THE LEARNER'S EFFORT IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

N S Prabhu

It is normal in the discussion of language pedagogy to focus attention either on teaching activities or on learning theories. In discussing teaching activities, we are concerned with what the teacher does or gets done by learners in the classroom and, at a remove, with what supports, demands or constrains the teacher's work, in the form of syllabuses and materials. In the discussion of learning theories, we are concerned with what might happen to the learner's language ability as a result of such teaching activities or, more widely, as a result of encounter with the language anywhere. These two areas of pedagogic discussion can be said to constitute two dimensions of the notion of a 'method': a method is, on one dimension, a set of classroom procedures for the teacher to carry out and, on another dimension, a concept or theory of language learning which informs or justifies those teaching procedures. Accordingly, we classify different views or formulations of language pedagogy as different methods, i.e. different combinations of teaching procedure and learning theory.

There is, however, one other aspect of language pedagogy which can usefully be brought under focus and, when examined, can reveal a meaningful basis for linking teaching activities and learning theories. This has to do with the nature of the learner's effort in carrying out classroom activities - not with the teacher's effort or intention in setting the activities, nor with the hypothesised psychological impact of those activities, but simply with what the learner has to do to perform them successfully. The form of an activity set by the teacher does not always indicate correctly the nature of the effort demanded of the learner in its performance, and the teacher's intentions about the learner's effort may often be at variance with the actual effort the learner has to make. Any impact that a teaching activity has on the learner's language development, however, has to be the result of what the learner does, rather than of what the teacher does or intends the learner to do. An examination of the learner's effort is thus of some importance in relating teaching activities to learning theories.

The purpose of this paper is to identify different forms of effort by the learner in the language classroom, and to suggest what may be called a broad typology of

learner effort. I will also try to point out the possible benefits of bringing such a typology to bear on the discussion of teaching activities and learning theories.

Imitation versus Cerebration.

Let me begin with a very general distinction between two types of effort by the learner, which I will call 'imitation' and 'cerebration'. Imitation is a matter of the learner attempting to do, as accurately as possible, what the teacher does in an exemplary role - such as producing a sound or pattern of sounds as exemplified, repeating words or sentences, altering sequences of words as demonstrated, copying strings of words or sentences from the textbook or blackboard into a note book, or conforming to a given format of writing (such as the format of a letter or job application). The effort is to achieve a close resemblance to the model provided - to conform to it as completely as possible. The language learner imitates the behaviour of the language knower in order to become a language knower himself/herself, in due course. Cerebration, in contrast, involves the learner thinking things out - finding ways of distinguishing between sounds or sound sequences, looking for workable rules for putting together word sequences, puzzling out reasons why sentences are right or wrong, applying given rules to make choices between alternatives, guessing the meaning of a word, making the most sense of what is heard or read, performing a piece of reasoning on the strength of what is known or can be inferred, or putting meaning across as well as can be done with available resources of language. Cerebration is essentially effort to cope with problems - to make sense, to work things out, and to put solutions to a test. The language learner attempts to become a language knower, not by copying the latter's language behaviour, but by constructing the knowledge-system that underlies that behaviour.

There have, as we know, been pedagogic approaches which aimed primarily, or exclusively, at the effort of imitation by the learner. The audio-lingual method was, at one stage, more frankly labelled as the mimicry-memorization ('mim-mem') method,and the term 'language drill' clearly refers to an activity in which the learner is called on to imitate repeatedly and quickly. Dialogues have been used to get learners to imitate longer stretches of language, and there are modernised versions of the same basic activity today, in the form of role-play activities. There have also been pedagogic activities aiming mainly or entirely at the effort of cerebration by the learner. The grammar-translation method of the past century, and the classical-scholastic procedures that preceded them, both involved getting

learners to puzzle out parts of the language system, as did later teaching procedures which were labelled 'cognitive-code'. These approaches too have their modernised versions, in the form of 'grammatical consciousness-raising', 'focused learning', 'instructed language acquisition' and task-based teaching. Indeed, one way of understanding the periodical pendulum swings in the history of language pedagogy is to see the profession as moving its bets, as it were, between the effort of imitation and the effort of cerebration (or hedging its bets between the two in some way).

While imitation and cerebration can be related relatively easily to different teaching approaches, it is less straightforward to relate them to different learning theories. On the face of it, imitation implies the theory that language learning is a matter of copying the language knower - with some effort to begin with, but with less and less effort as recurrent attempts are made, leading eventually in an effortless, automatic copying of the behaviour involved. This is the familiar notion of habit-forming as a process of language learning. Similarly, cerebration seems to imply the theory that language learning is a conscious process of rule-discovery and rule-application, the rules discovered at different stages eventually forming a less conscious knowledge-system able to support language behaviour. This is the notion of learning a language by internalizing its grammar. However, this is only an obvious interpretation. It is equally possible to see imitation as a facilitator of internal grammar construction: repeated copying of a piece of language, it can be argued, brings about a subconscious abstraction of its structural features, leading to rule-formation. The fact that the learner's effort consists of imitation need not mean that language-learning itself, or later language-use, is a matter of mere imitation. Indeed, if one looks at the early ideas of language drills and habit-formation, developed by such thinkers as Harold Palmer in the early part of this century, one can see the notion that a 'habit' is in fact a principle of sentence-construction, or pattern, abstracted subconsciously from the set of sentences imitated, and employed thereafter to construct new sentences (Palmer, 1921). Imitation, therefore, may well be thought of as a favourable condition for internal system-development, far from being a denial of it. Similarly, cerebration need not imply the theory that language-learning is a process of conscious grammar-construction which then becomes a subconscious knowledge system. There can be forms of cerebration which do not focus at all on the language as such; and even forms of cerebration which do focus on language can be viewed as merely favourable circumstances, or useful triggers, to a process of subconscious grammar-development, as done in arguments for grammatical conscious-raising (Rutherford, 1987).

There is, in passing, one area of language pedagogy where imitation points clearly to the theory that learning is a matter of copying behaviour. I am referring to the teaching of language for specific purposes, that is to say, the teaching of specific, and limited, language for specific, and limited, use. If limiting the learner to specific forms, samples or uses of language is seen as creating favourable circumstances for internal system development, there would in effect be a claim about the possibility of limited internal systems, delimitable by pedagogic decision - a claim larger than has been made in the discussion of specific-purpose language teaching. Therefore, teaching language for specific purposes must mean getting the learner to copy the typical behaviour of language-users in specific situations, with imitation as the most relevant learner-effort. The teaching of limited language thus implies what may be called a limited theory of language learning - one which regards copying as the learning process.

Reproduction versus Simulation.

Let me now go on to a further distinction in learner effort, within the category which I have called imitation. I would like to distinguish between imitation of the language form itself, which I will call 'reproduction', and imitation of language behaviour with attention to its context, which I will call 'simulation'. Reproduction thus aims at linguistic accuracy or approximation in the act the copying, while simulation aims at a match between language form and its context, i.e. at appropriacy. The kinds of activity that are normally called language-practice, or perhaps uncontextualised language practice - such as a repetition drill, the use of a substitution table, memorization and recall of language samples, sentence construction on a given model, some forms of heavily guided composition (which make copying look like composing) - are all a matter of reproduction, in the way I am using the term. Many kinds of activity which are referred to as communicative practice, or 'structural practice with functional honesty', to use Johnson's (1982: 109) term - such as role-playing a given dialogue, making choices between given expressions in the light of such requirements as politeness and formality, writing a letter, report or job application by imitating a given model - are all a matter of simulation. In reproduction, learners are occupied with linguistic forms; in simulation, they are occupied with what may be regarded as an indexing of linguistic forms with their communicative values or functions. Reproduction can be said to lead to the ability, as Newmark (1966) saw it, to ask a stranger for a light with "do you have a light?", "Do you have fire?" or "Are you a match's owner?",

while simulation is meant to lead to a choice of "Do you have a light?" or "Got a match?" in preference to the other expressions.

Reproduction has clearly been a central part of the Structural Approach to language pedagogy, though it has had a stricter adherence in the Audiolingual Method, arising from the work of Fries and Lado, than in the Situational Method advocated by Hornby, which represented some attempt at simulation. Arguments for a central place for simulation have been advanced, and accepted fairly widely, in the last 20 years, under the label Communicative Approach. Following normal rhetorical tactics, the Communicative Approach has been presented as a challenge to the Structural Approach and as a radical replacement for it. It is therefore important to realise that replacing the Structural Approach with the Communicative Approach is, in terms of learner effort, replacing reproduction with simulation. The general nature of the learner's effort is still imitation - a matter of copying language behaviour. Further, although simulation represents, from one point of view, a widening of pedagogic intentions based on a less restricted view of language ability, it also represents, from another point of view, a more restricted view of language and a more limited theory of learning. Learners' imitation of language forms can, as we have noted, be seen as a favourable condition for internal system development, the system so developed forming the basis of subsequent language behaviour. Reproduction, that is to say, permits the view that language learning is a matter of internalizing a system of rules, not just a matter of copying the language knower's behaviour. It is difficult to see how such a view of learning can be reconciled with simulation, since the situational appropriacy of language forms is at best a matter of established convention in a language community, falling far short of being a productive system. When learners are able to say to a stranger, "Do you have fire?", "Have you got illumination?", "Are you a match's owner?" etc., they are giving evidence of an internalized grammatical system, since they are producing well-formed linguistic expressions which they could not have merely copied from a language knower. When, on the other hand, learners are able to choose the situationally appropriate expressions "Do you have a light?" or "Got a match?", they can only be copying a language knower's behaviour in a similar situation, simply because it is impossible to see what system of rules could lead to a choice of appropriate expressions over inappropriate ones, without any copying of behaviour as such. One can perhaps point to the possibility of a rule system of pragmatics underlying some aspects of appropriacy in language behaviour, but it is still fair to say that a very large part of situational appropriacy is a matter of ad hoc convention, rather than rule-governed behaviour. In any case, pedagogic arguments in support of simulation have consistently appealed to conventional appropriacy, rather than to

any rule system underlying appropriacy - indeed, they have laid stress on the fact that appropriacy is not a matter of rule systems and therefore needs to be acquired through simulation. If this is so, the claims that can be made for simulation in preference to reproduction are not very large. Simulation is preferable to reproduction only in terms of pedagogic intentions. In terms of learner effort, it is as much a matter of imitation as reproduction; and, in terms of learning theory, it is much more limited than reproduction, since it regards learning itself as no more than a copying of behaviour.

Construction versus Deployment.

I now wish to make one further distinction in learner effort, this time within the category of cerebration. We can, once again, distinguish between cerebration focussed on language itself, which I will call 'construction', and cerebration focused on a knowledge of the world handled through language, which I will call 'deployment'. 'Construction' refers both to an effort by the learner to understand some part of the language system - a matter of construing the system - and to any effort to put together linguistic expressions on the strength of that understanding. The term 'exercise', in contrast to the term 'practice', generally refers to the effort of construction - an activity in which the learner is challenged to understand and demonstrate that understanding. An exercise is like a test, in that it presents the learner with risks of going wrong, unlike practice which aims to avoid or minimise such risks. All grammatical exercises, in this sense of the term 'exercise', call for the learner effort of construction, as do various forms of vocabulary or pronunciation exercises, and indeed exercises calling for an assessment or explanation of appropriacy, though these are rarely employed. In contrast, what I am calling 'deployment' involves learners handling information and developing knowledge about the world, by drawing on what information and knowledge of the world they already have, what cognitive abilities of inferring, reasoning, relating, etc, they possess, and what linguistic resources they command. Reading, in the sense of interpreting texts, involves the effort of deployment, as does free composition, in the sense of learners finding ways of saying what they have to say. The 'immersion' classroom - learners studying a curricular subject in the medium of the target language - calls for the effort of deployment, in that it makes learners acquire new knowledge through the language. Task-based activity, in the sense the term was used on the Bangalore Project (Prabhu, 1987) is a means of getting beginner-level learners to make the effort of deployment in the language classroom. Deployment is typically the effort called for in problem-solving activities. Reading,

writing, acquiring new knowledge can all be regarded as processes of problem-solving in a very general sense; task-based teaching can then be seen as a more deliberate, more focused and more manipulated form of problem-solving, as a language teaching device. It is true that what I have called the effort of construction is also a form of focused problem-solving, except that it involves solving problems of language as such, unlike deployment which involves the use of language as a resource in solving problems of world knowledge.

I pointed out earlier that cerebration in regard to the language being learnt - what we are now calling construction - has been a part of language pedagogy for a long time, in such approaches as the Grammar-Translation Method and the Cognitive-Code method. I also pointed out how the language teaching profession has, at various times, upheld or denied the value of such effort of construction for the learning of a language. It is perhaps worth asking, for a moment, what follows when the effort of construction is rejected as a pedagogic procedure. One may, in rejecting construction, reject all cerebration, as happened more than once when grammar-teaching was rejected as a means of language teaching. Such rejection of all cerebration leaves one with only imitation as a desirable learner effort, whether in the form of reproduction or simulation. Alternatively, one may deny the value of construction but still see value to cerebration. This leads to the adoption of deployment as a desirable form of learner effort. To put it differently, the learner grappling with the rules of grammar is making a cerebral effort focused on language. If, in rejecting this, one rejects both the cerebral effort and the focus on language, one is only left with relatively mindless activity, with the focus at best on a faithful copying of behaviour. If, on the other hand, one rejects only the focus on language but not cerebral effort, one has the option of setting up activity involving cerebration on things other than language - that is to say, deployment.

The effort of construction can, as we noted earlier, be related to one of two theories of learning: it can be seen either to lead the learner to a conscious knowledge of the linguistic system, which then gradually descends to a sub-conscious level, or merely to serve to trigger a separate, subconscious process of system development. In contrast to this, the effort of deployment is relatable only to the latter theory - that a subconscious process of system development is triggered and promoted when language is employed as a resource in an effort to understand the world.

Four types of learner effort.

I have now identified four types of learner effort in the language classroom - reproduction, simulation, construction and deployment. Reproduction and simulation both involve imitation - of the forms of language in one case, and of the social role of the language-user in the other. We can perhaps call classroom activities involving these two types of effort 'form-focused' and 'role-focused', respectively. The other two types of effort - construction and deployment - involve cerebration, cerebration on the rules of language in one case, and on knowledge of the world in the other. Activities involving these two forms of effort can therefore be called rule-focused and meaning-focused, respectively. From a different point of view, we can group together the effort of reproduction and that of construction, both being focused on language as an autonomous phenomenon. They differ between them in that one involves a copying of the phenomenon while the other involves trying to make sense of it. Terms such as 'grammar-teaching' or 'the teaching of structure' are often used ambivalently - to refer to reproduction and/or construction - thus obscuring a major difference in terms of learner effort, namely, that between imitation and cerebration. Similarly, simulation and deployment can be grouped together, as forms of effort focused on things outside language as a formal entity. The focus, in one case, is on the performance of a social role, and in the other on an understanding of the world. The term 'communicative' is often used ambivalently to refer to either or both of them, thus blurring the distinction, once again, between imitation and cerebration.

Usefulness of the Typology.

What is the usefulness of this categorization of learner effort? First, it enables us to see known forms of language pedagogy in a somewhat new light, or from a newer point of view. Looking at things from as many viewpoints as possible is one of the mental tools we have for increasing understanding. It is, for instance, common in the discussion of language pedagogy to contrast a formal, grammar-based approach with an apparently more comprehensive communicative approach directed to real-life language use. But this is a contrast based on teaching intentions, nor on learning theories. An examination of learner effort leads us to a different contrast, that between imitation and cerebration, which is likely to be more significant for the process of learning. We then begin to see that both a grammar-based approach and a communicative approach can involve no more than a copying of behaviour and that, between the two approaches it is the grammar-based

approach which permits a non-behaviourist theory of learning even when it involves only the effort of imitation.

Secondly, a categorization of learner effort provides us with an additional frame of reference to which we can usefully relate concepts and issues in pedagogy. Take, for instance, the concept of authenticity. The prevalent notion is that authenticity is a characteristic of the samples of language presented to the learner: the samples are authentic if they are taken from actual instances of language use. This notion has been challenged by Widdowson (1978: 79-80) who regards authenticity, instead, as a characteristic of the learner's engagement with language samples: the learner's engagement is authentic if the learner responds, interacts or copes with language samples in the same way that language users do. Given our categories of learner effort, we can see that the first notion of authenticity makes sense when the learner's effort consists of simulation, while Widdowson's notion clearly envisages the effort of deployment. What is involved therefore is not just a terminological difference but a difference in theories of learning: simulation-based pedagogy cannot possibly adopt Widdowson's notion of authenticity simply because simulation cannot be claimed to be the central characteristic of real-life language use. Or take Widdowson's well-known distinction between 'usage' or 'use'. The distinction is clearly between language-focused and non-language focused learner effort - between reproduction and construction on the one hand, and simulation and deployment on the other. However, the distinction leaves out the equally important contrast between imitation and cerebration, though Widdowson elsewhere takes a stand against simulation-based ESP, and in defence of grammatical problem-solving. The usage-use distinction, therefore, is only a distinction between reproduction and deployment, though it is presented as a more global one. Similarly, Krashen's (1981) distinction between 'learning' and 'acquisition' is only a distinction between construction and deployment, in our terms; it ignores reproduction and simulation, with the result that its proponent often finds himself recommending simulation procedures as if they were deployment procedures. We can also relate the issue of error-treatment in language pedagogy to our categorization of learner effort. Imitation-based pedagogy (reproduction and simulation) is necessarily committed to error-prevention: if language learning takes place through an imitation of language behaviour, then it is crucial for the imitation to be accurate; any errors in imitation can, in principle, make the learner an erroneous language user. Cerebration-based pedagogy, on the other hand, has necessarily to permit errors by learners: problem-solving would be a mere pretence if it did not permit trial and error. Further, construction-based pedagogy has a commitment to dealing with errors when they occur - e.g. setting

further exercises or promoting a better understanding of the rules, in some way - while deployment-based pedagogy is necessarily error-tolerant, since dealing with errors as such will undermine the genuineness of deployment.

Finally, let me point out briefly a possible use of this typology of learner effort in the preparation of teaching materials. It is common to find, in textbooks for language teaching, an apparently varied pattern of activities for the learner, under such labels as comprehension, vocabulary, grammar or structure, pronunciation, and composition. In the more modernised textbooks, one also finds sections on such communicative activities as role-play, writing an office report, etc. A closer examination of such materials, however, often reveals that most of the comprehension questions demand of the learner little more than a copying of relevant parts of the reading text (a question merely serving as a clue to which part of the text is to be copied), the vocabulary exercise calls mainly for a copying of words or an imitation of given sentences by incorporating given words in them, that the grammar or structure work involves a piece of intensive 'practice' (that is to say, reproduction in some form), that the pronunciation work is understandably a matter of accurate imitation, that the communicative activity of role-play is a matter of learners (working in pairs in keeping with enlightened pedagogy) mouthing to each other their parts in a scripted dialogue, and that the writing of an office report is a matter of imitating faithfully all the essential parts of a model office report, making only some substitutions of content words to alter the information content. It is clearly the textbook writer's intention to employ a variety of teaching activities (and indeed, different teaching approaches - both linguistic and communicative), but, from the viewpoint of learner effort, what all or most of the activities call for is just imitation. Perhaps it would be useful for textbook writers to bear a typology of learner effort in mind and to ensure that the activities provided do involve the type of effort which they see the most value to - or, if they wished to be eclectic, to ensure that there are some activities which involve each type of learner effort. A typology of learner effort can thus serve both as a further dimension to pedagogic understanding and as a further aid to pedagogic practice.

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